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40 Help sought for small Libby spills

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Special to the Inter Lake

LIBBY — There is a growing need for a response team in Libby to deal with small vermiculite spills caused by homeowners and contractors remodeling buildings, Mayor Tony Berget told the Libby Area Technical Assistance Group recently.

"The way we have building and remodeling going on today, I think we need something," Berget said.

He explained that he was replacing a wall fan in a residential building he owns when vermiculite came out of the wall and spilled on the floor.

"I was working on this little house and didn't know it was in there," he said.

BERGET SAID it wasn't a lot but it was vermiculite.

The Environmental Protection Agency's homeowner pamphlet recommends that the federal agency be notified immediately. But local cleanup crews might not be able to respond as quickly as a homeowner or landlord needs.

"The best thing is to give us a call so we can send someone to evaluate it and determine the best course of action," said Courtney Zamora, on-site manager for cleanup contracting.

However, Zamora said the quick response team concept is for bigger problems such as a tree falling through a building.

"IF WE SPEND all of our time responding to these calls, it takes manpower away from the cleanup," she said.

Berget's concern is that the existing system isn't quick enough and results in remodeling delays.

Gayla Benefield, chairwoman of the group, said it is a serious dilemma.

"I'm sorry to say we don't have this but we have thought of it," Benefield said. "We put in a request to the EPA that have a need for a person and we hope we can have someone in place to do these things."

Sean Olivera, of EPA contractor CDM, said to get a program like this to work the city and the county need to put an ordinance on the books.

BENEFIELD SAID it's both a risk and financial problem for homeowners and landlords.

"The EPA needs to have a team set up to address these things," she said. "The biggest thing is getting the authority to have someone out there."

One of the long-term issues being discussed involves vermiculite being left in walls of buildings or being discovered in the ground after the federal agency and state complete the Superfund cleanup of the Libby-Troy areas.